New year, new you

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Abstract:

Computer programs that make it easier to manage diet, weight loss and exercise are discussed. Software should stress healthy eating habits and contain reliable nutrition information.

Full Text:
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Whether you're ready or not, the new year is upon us, bringing with it the timeworn tradition of New Year's resolutions, those promises that you make each year to live life to the fullest, to be a better person, and, most urgently, to improve your physical condition. Although these may seem like simple goals on January 1, at least one tends to fall by the wayside the next day when you walk into a kitchen full of leftover turkey and holiday candy.

But 1994 can be different. You can keep your resolution to shed those extra pounds and develop a sensible diet. Your computer can help with diet programs that make it easier to manage your diet and watch your weight loss. Many of them also help you design and monitor a fitness regimen.

The software you choose will ultimately depend on your lifestyle and goals, but there are certain features that you should look for in any program. The first is good nutrition, says Dr. William R. Fackler, a Richardson, Texas, pediatrician who has used Diet Analyst from Parsons Technology. A program should stress healthy eating habits and should contain reliable nutritional information. But before you select any diet program, you should talk with your physician, says Dr. Fackler. It's important to take into account any medical problems that would require a special diet or any fitness limitations that would restrict activity.

Harry Barney, associate professor in the School of Applied Health Professions at the University of Connecticut and a user of another program, Fitness Software Systems' Nutrition Expert, for nearly two years, recommends that you select a program that provides detailed feedback. It's essential that you understand why a particular food is good for you and why others are not. The educational value of a program is important in helping you maintain a healthy diet after you've lost weight. Barney also recommends that you choose a program that you can personalize. Because everyone has specific needs, it's important to find a program that will treat you as an individual.

ORGANIZE YOUR APPETITE

One of the biggest challenges when you begin a diet program is knowing where to start and how to get organized. No diet program is going to be successful if you don't monitor your eating and fitness habits. Knowing the quantity and nutrient content of what you have eaten can be a determining factor in losing weight.

"Most times, poor nutrition can be directly attributed to a lack of understanding of how foods and their nutritional components affect our bodies," says Michael J. Harnad, president of Fitness Software Systems. "Knowing what your present requirements are allows you to make the dietary adjustments to lose or gain weight."

Harnad had been an amateur bodybuilder for nearly 13 years but felt that he was not competing at his full potential. The problem, he discovered, was a lack of organization. Without a detailed nutritional plan, it was easy for him to overeat slightly, producing a bit of flabbiness that cost him points during competitions. Using his master's degree in computer science, Harnad developed software programs to help regulate his nutritional and training regimens.

"It started as a personal project, and then I discovered that other people were interested in it, too," he says. "To achieve fitness, one must commit to a lifestyle that includes regular exercise and sound nutrition. This means knowing what exercises to perform and what foods to eat."

Nutrition Expert uses your age, sex, height, weight, and activity level to develop a personal profile. Then it uses that profile to help with meal planning and diet analysis.

This user-specific response is one of the program's most valuable features. according to Harry Barney.

"People are really hungry to understand what they should be doing on a personal level," he explains. "Diet is a very individualized thing."

Nutrition Expert analyzes your diet for carbohydrates, protein, fat, sodium, cholesterol, amino acids, and various vitamins and includes a 500-food database that you can personalize by adding your favorites.

Barney says the program is easy to use and adapts to your changing needs. Once you reach your weight loss goal, you can redesign your profile to develop a maintenance program.

Only a combination of good nutrition and fitness habits will lead to better health, Harnad believes, so he developed another program, Training Expert, to help you plan a fitness routine.

Training Expert compiles a personal profile based on your height, weight, and training goals and prescribes a customized workout designed from 75 varied fitness routines.

Both programs--designed to be used together--include graphic features to help track your progress.

SEARCHING FOR DISCIPLINE

Craig Leonard, a technical sergeant with the 114th Fighter Squadron in the Oregon Air National Guard, had trouble finding the discipline to maintain his weight at military standards, so he turned to his computer and DietPro by Lifestyle Software Group. Leonard finds that it's hard to cheat when you have to account daily for every morsel of food you eat.

"I have problems maintaining my discipline, [but] I've found that this program really works," Leonard says. "I've made recommendations to the medical hospital at the base to include [DietPro] in its library for anyone who is having problems [with weight control]."

Every morning, Leonard uses the program to plan his day, and each evening, he makes sure that

everything he ate is listed in the computer. At the end of each week, he prints a compilation of his exercise and eating habits for that week. He checks his progress and can tell what nutrients he lacks or where he has overindulged.

DietPro analyzes 36 nutrients in more than 5000 foods from the Department of Agriculture's food list and from fast-food chains. You can also enter your own foods and recipes, an option that Leonard enjoys.

"It's a pretty powerful option," he says. "Not everyone consumes everything, so to be able to [analyze] your own recipes is useful."

DietPro also offers an extensive list of activities and allows you to develop a fitness plan based on your own personal profile.

"You have to take the average ...profile with most programs," Leonard explains, "but with DietPro, if you have a low metabolism, you can adjust the program to account for that."

SCARED HEALTHY

For some, weight loss goals may be dictated by health, not just a desire to look and feel better. That's how Dieter's Edge 2000 was born.

"Seven years ago, my doctor scared me into a diet, and I lost 60 pounds," says Fred Shadko, developer of this program. "I wrote a little program to help me with that. When I showed it to other people, they were also interested."

Distributed by LivingSoft, Dieter's Edge 2000 can help you balance your intake of protein, fats, and carbohydrates as well as achieve targeted minimums and maximums of cholesterol, sodium, fiber, vitamins, and other food components. The program has a database of more than 2000 items, including products from seven fast-food chains.

One unique capability of the program is that it can determine your personal break-even point based on how your body reacts to your diet and exercise in a 30-day period, Shadko says. Your break-even point is the number of calories that your body needs to maintain your current weight and activity level. Once you have determined this, you can adjust your calorie intake to safely lose weight.

Evelyn Richards, a retired Xerox salesperson, used Dieter's Edge 2000 for nearly five months and lost about 40 pounds. She found that entering her personal data was fun.

"It got to be kind of a game," Richards explains. "It was very motivational to see the numbers change and the graphs come up and to see how I was doing. I looked at the graphs daily because I set daily goals."

Entering this personal nutrition and fitness data was also a motivational factor for certified financial consultant Rusty Welch, who has written off nearly 30 pounds using Dieter's Edge 2000. Learning about the nutritional content of his favorite foods was also rewarding, he says.

"I had previously just counted calories, and this really opened my eyes to overall nutrition," Welch explains. "It was a real education."

To help you stay within the nutritional boundaries you've established, Dieter's Edge 2000 also includes a treat feature, which will calculate the allowable portion size of any food you want to eat. For example, if you crave a hot-fudge sundae, this program will tell you what size sundae you can eat without blowing your diet.

"The single biggest hazard is people getting discouraged," Shadko explains, "so we give them the ability to have a treat."

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

As a pediatrician, Dr. Fackler understands the importance of good health, but two years ago, his was questionable. Since then, Fackler has adjusted his lifestyle, using Parsons Technology's Diet Analyst . He has reached his personal weight goal, lowered his cholesterol from about 240 to 180, and reversed the clogging of one artery.

"It's not a diet program; it's a lifetime eating program," Fackler says. "It has taught me to select the healthy foods and ignore the others. This is the first program that I have been able to stick with."

Diet Analyst helps you manage your health program by tracking 26 nutrients from a database of 1700 foods, including brand-name products and menu items from 13 fast-food chains. You can also monitor your exercise regimen and generate a variety of reports, such as an exercise log, an account of your current nutritional status, and a compilation of the data for a single day or a number of days.

Fackler uses his Diet Analyst twice each day for about five minutes. He records everything he eats--even the binges and mistakes--so that he can accurately determine how he's doing. Fackler also recommends the program to his older patients and their parents.

NUTRITION COUNTS

As a personal trainer, Tona Hilwig recommends ways to help clients develop a personal weight loss program. Diet Balancer by Nutridata Software helps her clients understand the nutritional content of foods, she says. It teaches them to think about what they eat and how they can maintain a healthy diet.

Diet Balancer tracks 26 nutrients, including calories, fat, cholesterol, and fiber, and has a database of more than 1700 foods, including products from 13 fast-food chains. You can also add your favorite foods to the database. If you must minimize certain things in your diet, such as fat or sodium, Diet Balancer can help you plan meals. The program also includes a selection of prepared menus.

One feature that is important to Hilwig and her clients is the graphic section that can track your performance for up to 60 days.

"The charts show them what they should be doing and how they are progressing," she explains, speaking of her clients. "It helps them see how close they are to their goals."

REACH YOUR GOAL

Once you've reached your weight loss goal, these software products can help you maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Sharon Brehm began using Diet Expert by Expert Software to help maintain her weight and plan a

healthier diet. Through the program, she has learned the fat and nutrient content, as well as the caloric value, of different foods.

Diet Expert's database lists the nutritional content of 2300 foods and can help you track items that you may be trying to avoid, such as sugar, salt, and cholesterol. The program analyzes your current diet for 30 nutrients to help you overcome excesses and deficiencies, and it analyzes your current fitness plan to develop an exercise regimen based on your age, sex, weight, and frame.

"I liked the low price and flexibility of the program," Brehm says. "If you just wanted to plan a few meals, you could use it for a few days, but if you wanted to drastically change your eating habits, you could plan meals for up to a year."

MONITOR YOUR PROGRESS

Other software programs that help monitor your progress toward better nutrition and fitness include NutritionPro by ESHA Research; Sante by Hopkins Technology; Nutri-Calc by CAMDE; NutriBase by CyberSoft; and Diet Simple, Diet Simple Plus, and Diet Easy by N-Squared Computing.

NutritionPro calculates the nutritional values of 2000 foods and can track excesses and deficiencies in your diet. You can also plan a fitness workout cycle from a database of 110 fitness activities. NutritionPro is also available in a scaled-down student version.

Sante monitors your progress by analyzing your food intake for 30 nutrients. It maintains a database of 3000 foods. The program also determines your daily calorie need based on a personal profile and can help you develop a weight loss plan. Colorful charts and graphs display suggested caloric and nutrient breakdowns based on the most recent government recommendations.

Nutri-Calc assesses foods and recipes for 30 components and compares the results to U.S. recommended daily allowances or your own dietary goals. The program comes with a database of 1600 foods, including fast foods and prepared foods, and you can add your favorite foods and recipes. You can also buy an additional food database that includes 1800 more listings. One of Nutri-Calc's advantages is that it will display ratios such as calcium to phosphorus or polyunsaturated fat to saturated fat.

NutriBase, an unusually comprehensive diet tracker, lists the nutritional content of more than 30,000 foods, including the offerings of 44 national chain restaurants.

N-Squared Computing usually develops programs for professional use but has also produced three scaled-down programs for use by individuals. Diet Simple, Diet Simple Plus, and Diet Easy each contain a database of 2025 foods (other versions of Diet Easy listing 5000 and 8500 foods are also available).

Diet Simple tracks 28 components in the foods you select and graphs the results by the percentage of the U.S. recommended daily allowance that is satisfied. Diet Simple Plus, an extension of Diet Simple, tracks 58 items. Both programs also include text explanations and recommendations to help you overcome deficiencies and excesses.

Diet Easy creates menu plans, tracks your progress, and maintains a database of your favorite recipes. It also helps you create weight loss and exercise plans and can generate graphical printouts. N-Squared also makes diet programs Nutritionist III and Nutritionist IV for use by professional dietitians.

DEDICATE YOURSELF

Although tracking every crumb of food that you consume and every movement that you make in your fitness routine may seem tiresome, dedication is the key to success with these software programs. As with any traditional weight loss program, hard work is the primary requirement--but your computer can help make the struggle easier.

"I've probably got umpteen calorie-counting books, but when you can sit down at the computer and enter what you've eaten, it's much simpler," says Jennifer James Chadwick, who is halfway to her goal of losing 20 pounds with the help of Dieter's Edge 2000. "It's so painful with the calorie-counting books, but it's much less painful with the computer. The hardest part is to overcome human nature. You have to make yourself be consistent."

FITNESS I/O

Although you know that exercise is a necessary component of weight loss, does the thought of spending endless hours doing the same mindless routines with the same old fitness equipment discourage you? Your computer can put the spark back into your exercise routine with programs from Computer Athlete and Computer Directions.

ExerCitement by Computer Athlete links your exercise equipment and home computer to create an arcade-game fitness program. ExerCitement is compatible with all brands of exercise bikes, stair-climbing machines, treadmills, cross-country ski machines, and rowing machines. There are only two requirements: Your exercise equipment and your computer must be located in the same room, and your computer must have a game port.

You control the game with two directional buttons attached to the machine by Velcro; a photoelectronic eye and a reflector measure your speed. A 12-foot cable connects your computer's game port to the exercise equipment base and communicates your movements to the computer.

As you start exercising, you become a contestant in a race where your motions directly correspond to those of the computer athlete. The program has five different race sequences (one for each of the machines mentioned above). For example, you could cycle down a winding road, row through open waters, or bound across the craters of an alien planet--the race scenario used with the stair-climbing machine. However, you can choose any game, regardless of the equipment you own. Besides choosing the game you play, you can also designate the speed of the race; it can be set fast enough that even expert arcade players are challenged.

You score points in each race by dodging obstacles, avoiding menacing characters, and demolishing your opponents. For every 1000 points earned, you move to the next level and a new world.

ExerCitement runs off a floppy disk and requires 512K of RAM. For more information about the program, contact Computer Athlete at 5193 Betonywood Place, Dublin, Ohio 43017, or call (800) 860-4506. ExerCitement sells for $129.95 and includes all the hardware you need to run the program.

If you prefer getting out on the aerobics floor for exercise, Fitness Partner, developed by Computer Directions, is a CD-ROM that can help you design your own exercise routines.

When you begin, the computer will create your personal profile based on your age, sex, fitness level, and weight loss or muscle-toning goals. Then the computer automatically selects from 75 full-motion video exercises to design your workout, setting the speed and number of repetitions for each exercise. Fitness

Partner can design up to nine routines, one for each day of the week and two alternates, for up to ten users.

Fitness Partner also lets you custom-design your own workout. You can choose exercises for the warmup, workout, and cool-down sections; pick the style of background music; and set the speed and number of repetitions for each individual exercise.

Roni Smaldino, a certified aerobics instructor, leads you through each routine, providing audio coaching and words of encouragement. If you don't understand a particular exercise, you can stop the workout and go to the learning mode for a personal demonstration.

Fitness Partner requires a multi-media-compatible computer, including a CD-ROM drive, VGA-plus color capabilities, a digital sound card, and Windows 3.1 or higher. Fitness Partner lists for $69.95. For more information about this CD-ROM product, contact Computer Directions at 2712 West Shaw Avenue, Suite 234, Fresno, California 93711, or call (800) 600-2348.

FIT PRODUCTS

Nutri-Calc--$39.95

Nutri-Calc Expanded Foods Database (additional 1800 foods)--$19.95

CAMDE 449 E. Saratoga St. Gilbert, AZ 85296 (602) 926-2632

Nutri-Base--$69.95

CYBERSOFT 3851 E. Thunderhill Pl. Phoenix, AZ 85044-6679 (602) 759-4849

NutritionPro--$79.00

NutritionPro (Student Version)--$29.95

ESHA RESEARCH P.O. Box 13028 Salem, OR 97309 (503) 585-6242

Diet Expert--$14.95

EXPERT SOFTWARE 800 Douglas Rd., North Tower Ste. 355 Coral Gables, FL 33134-3128 (800) 759-2562

Nutrition Expert 2.0--$79.99

Training Expert 2.0--$79.99 ($139.98, if purchased together)

FITNESS SOFTWARE SYSTEMS P.O. Box 160 Willington, CT 06279 (203) 429-2519

Sante--$59.95

HOPKINS TECHNOLOGY 421 Hazel Ln. Hopkins, MN 55343-7116 (612) 931-9376

DietPro (for DOS)--$39.95

DietPro (for Windows)--$59.95

LIFESTYLE SOFTWARE GROUP 63 Orange St. St. Augustine, FL 32084 (800) 289-1157 (904) 825-0220

Dieter's Edge 2000--$79.95

LIVINGSOFT 711-700 Pine Acre Rd. Janesville, CA 96114 (800) 626-1262 (916) 253-2700

Diet Simple--$25.00

Diet Simple Plus--$49.00

Diet Easy 2000 (2025-food database)--$49.00

Diet Easy 5000 (5000-food database)--$249.00

Diet Easy 8500 (8500-food database)--$349.00

Nutritionist III--$495.00

Nutritionist IV--$495.00

N-SQUARED COMPUTING 3040 Commercial St. SE, Ste. 240 Salem, OR 97302 (503) 364-9118

Diet Balancer 3.0--$59.95

NUTRIDATA SOFTWARE P.O. Box 769 Wappinger Falls, NY 12590 (800) 922-2988 (914) 298-1308

Diet Analyst 2.5--$59.00

PARSONS TECHNOLOGY P.O. Box 100 Hiawatha, IA 52233-0100 (800) 223-6925 (319) 395-9626